

## THE MISSING PASSAGE IN HORT'S TRANSLATION OF THEOPHRASTUS

CHALMERS L. GEMMILL, M.D.

Department of Pharmacology  
University of Virginia School of Medicine  
Charlottesville, Va.

IN looking for the passage in Sir Arthur Hort's *Theophrastus*,<sup>1,2</sup> *Enquiry into Plants* for the word ὄρχις, I found in the index that this word was in section 9.18.3. On turning to this section<sup>3</sup> I could not find the word either in the English translation or in the Greek text. There was a footnote at the bottom of page 310 explaining the omission of this passage on account of the description of the physical effects. Sarton<sup>4</sup> commented on this omission by remarking: "Such prudishness in a scientific book is truly shocking."

Since it is considered that the word orchid and the description of this plant was first given by Theophrastus (Ames<sup>5</sup>), it is of importance to have an English translation of this passage. The following translation is a composite<sup>6</sup> of the work of Professor Robert E. Dengler, Professor Phillip DeLacy, Professor James Constantine, and myself. The Greek text used was that of Wimmer.<sup>7</sup>

By bodily powers, I mean fertility and infertility. Some have the power to produce both from the same source, as in the case of the orchis.<sup>8</sup> For these have two [tuberous roots], the one larger, the other smaller.<sup>9</sup> The large one makes a person more effective in intercourse when given in the milk of a mountain-pastured goat, but the smaller harms and prevents [intercourse]. The plant has leaves like a squill, but smoother and smaller and the stalk resembles that of a pear or thorn. It seems strange that in the one plant two contrary effects should be present. It is not strange, however, that such powers exist. Aristophilus of Plataea, a pharmacist, asserted that he had certain drugs effective in producing greater potency as well as in taking it away completely; that it could produce impotence permanently, or for a given time; that is for two or three months, and that he used it in treating his slaves when he wished to punish or restrain one

of them. There are also drugs causing conception of one sex or the other, whence they call one species male-producing and the other female-producing; these are similar in appearance resembling basil. The fruit of the female-producing plant is like the bud of the olive but paler; that of the male-producing is like the olive just growing out of the bud, and is double, like the testicles of man. In order to make the semen unfertile, the fruit of the white ivy is given; for the opposite effect, the fruit of the willow-weed in water is used. The plant grows like wheat flax and has a fruit like millet. It is claimed that impotence results also from taking for thirty days the fruit of the honeysuckle steeped in white wine, in the dose of one choinix a day; at the end of such treatment complete impotence ensues.

The leaves of the milt-waste are said to produce sterility in women, but with the addition of some of the hoof and hide of a mule. The leaf is like hart's-tongue with slender roots and it prefers mountains and rocky sites. Mules are fond of it. It is also used for the spleen like honeysuckle.

Bracken is useful against flat and thin worms, against flat worms when dipped into honey, against thin worms when given in sweet wine with barley. If given to a pregnant woman, it is said that it produces a miscarriage; if not pregnant she becomes completely sterile. Female fern differs from fern in having a single-stemmed leaf and a large black root. Most valuable is a plant which a man from India had, who, not by ingesting it, but by merely applying it locally, had the potency that he could have intercourse as many times as he wished.<sup>10</sup> Some claim even twelve times, and he himself who was strong and big had intercourse with seventy. His sperm came in drops and finally brought blood. Women are strongly aroused when they used this drug. If this account is true, this drug has an unusual power.

In general, there are certain natural substances which increase the sexual appetite. This is not surprising, for we see such power in food juices from both wet and dry foods, and we see that they are able to produce other effects. In some places, they say, the water makes the women fertile, as in Thespia, elsewhere sterile, as in Pyrrha. This is the cause assigned by physicians. In Arcadian Heraclea, there is a wine which when drunk, drives men mad

and makes women sterile. Again, in Archaea, and especially around Cerynia, there is a kind of wine which causes pregnant women to miscarry, and if dogs eat of the grape, they abort. In taste, neither the grapes nor the wine have any difference. In Troezen, the wine makes men sterile who drink it. The Thasians make a soporific wine, another wine makes those who drink it sleepless. In fact, these are the effects on the body and its functions.

This passage is of interest for it is obvious that the ancient Greeks recognized that bodily functions could be increased or decreased by drugs. They also considered that drugs could be used for the production of male or female children. Also, drugs of plant origin could produce sterility and cause abortions. An active search for plants which possess these activities is being carried out at the present time.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Hort, A.: *Theophrastus, Enquiry into Plants*. 2 vols. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, reprinted 1961.
2. Theophrastus was born in 370 B.C. and died about 285 B.C.
3. Book IX may have been added after the death of Theophrastus and may have been written by an unknown author. Stannard, J.: The herbal as a medical document. *Bull. Hist. Med.* 43: 212-20, 1969.
4. Sarton, G.: *A History of Science*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959, vol. 1, footnote, page 555.
5. Ames, O.: The origin of the term orchis. *Amer. Orchid Soc. Bull.* 11:146-147, 1942.
6. The author wishes to thank Professors Robert E. Dengler, Phillip DeLacy, and James Constantine for their translations and suggestions.
7. Wimmer, F.: *Theophrasti Eresii, Opera Omnia*. Paris, Didot, 1866; reprinted Frankfurt am Main, Minerva, 1964. Greek and Latin texts.
8. The botanical names are taken from Hort, A.: *Theophrastus, Enquiry into Plants*, index of Plants, vol. 2.<sup>1</sup> No attempt is made at the present time for a closer identification of the plants.
9. It is characteristic of the common orchid of Greece (*Orchis papilionacea*) to have last year's tuber shrink and this year's tuber enlarge.
10. There are many herbs and medicines in ancient Indian medicine for increasing sexual capacity. For example, see Vatsyayana: *Kama Sutra*. Benares, Cosmopoli Kama Shastra Soc., 1961.